

## Six Guidelines for Comparing Religions Responsibly

*Comparing Religions* is a how-to handbook. We have taught comparison primarily through example in the course of the chapters. A set of abstract guidelines may help as well. There are six such guidelines to consider when doing any responsible comparison. Here are the first three:

1. *Always keep sameness and difference in some creative and constructive tension.*
2. *Always be aware of your own perspective as your perspective and not confuse it with some universal human position, that is, strive to be as “reflexive” as possible in your comparative practice.*
3. *Academic comparison works through comparing one historical religious complex (A) to another historical religious complex (B) through a third term, method, or comparative ground (C) that is derived from your own contemporary questions and concerns (as in #2), which need not be found in either A or B.*

A bit of explaining is in order here.

One large group of comparisons that we have engaged in our “Comparative Acts” involved those that rely directly on the universality of the biology and anatomy of the human body. The history of comparison is in fact fantastically rich here, with elaborate comparative literatures on the symbolisms and religious uses of birth, food and drink, hair, eyes, feet, puberty, right/left (that is, the two-armed form of the human), bodily fluids, emotional responses (weeping or laughing, for example), pain, sexual coupling, orgasm, abortion, sickness, healing, aging, and, of course, death. These are all very legitimate and very powerful Cs to choose as one’s comparative base or ground precisely because they are universally shared human experiences. Keeping in mind guideline 1, however, we cannot claim that these universal bodily experiences are experienced in the same ways across cultures and climes. They are not. But we can comfortably say that they are all experienced. In short, once we have chosen our two

historical religious complexes and our specific bodily ground, we have our sameness and our difference (guideline 1), and we have our A, our B, and our C (guideline 2). We are in good shape as far as the academic discipline of comparison goes.

Another large complex of comparisons that follow the guideline but that are a bit less universal are those that in fact make up much of the history of the study of religion that we have just narrated: myth, ritual, sacrifice, mysticism, initiation, divination, the sacred, miracle, the saint, and so on. As *Comparing Religions* makes very clear, each of these terms is rooted in western religious history, even as they carry a great deal of theoretical power outside those original cultural contexts.

It goes without saying—but we will say it anyway—that these guidelines invoke only the simplest of comparative practices, that is, those involving just two religious complexes and a single comparative ground. Comparison can, of course, also be done with multiple sets and even multiple comparative grounds or foundations.

The fourth guideline goes like this:

*4. The A and B should be chosen in such a way that they are roughly on the same level of sophistication vis-à-vis your contemporary concerns and questions and do not unduly privilege A or B.*

Basically, what we mean here is that, if you are going to compare an A and a B, make sure that you set up your comparisons fairly. For example, if one chooses to compare ethical norms with respect to social minorities (C), one should not compare Adolf Hitler from Christian Europe (A) and Mahatma Gandhi from modern Hinduism (B). One, however, might well compare the lives and teachings of Martin Luther King, Jr., from modern African-American Protestant Christianity (A) and Mahatma Gandhi from modern South Asian Hinduism (B).

These are, no doubt, ridiculously obvious examples, but they serve to make the point. This guideline is especially important when one is using one's own religious worldview as an A to compare with another religious worldview as a B. It is all too easy to compare the seemingly positive features of one's own tradition to the seemingly negative features of someone else's. In actual fact, every religious tradition is filled with much to admire and much to be suspicious of

from contemporary ethical and political perspectives.

Our fifth guideline goes like this:

*5. Do not choose a C that privileges the theological categories of either A or B.*

Irresponsible comparisons might, for example, include a comparison of after-life scenarios in Evangelical Christianity (A) and Tibetan Buddhism (B) that analyzes both religious complexes according to their acceptance or denial of “salvation through Jesus Christ” (C). Or, alternately, a comparison of Tibetan Buddhism (A) and Evangelical Christianity (B) that analyzes both religious complexes according to their acceptance or denial of the doctrines of “karma” and “reincarnation” (C). Obviously, this kind of game can be played either way, and neither way is an example of academic comparison as we are practicing it here. Similarly, under no circumstances can “the Bible” or “the Quran” or “the Veda” or any other local scripture become the universal basis or ground for comparison. That is not comparison. That is special pleading. That is not the comparative study of religion. That is religion.

This is not to say that comparative theology—that is, the comparison of religious truth-claims, usually from one’s own theological or religious perspective—is illegitimate or impossible. As we see in chapter 10, for religiously committed people such comparisons are in fact inevitable and often result in real insights and rich nuances that other, more secular approaches generally cannot provide. The question is whether such comparisons can be done responsibly and with sufficient levels of transparency and reflexivity. The claim of *Comparing Religions* is simply that to do comparative theology well, one must first engage in theologically open and historically fair comparisons.

Finally, our sixth and final guideline for comparing:

*6. Provoke and challenge universally. That is, if you choose to compare A and B through some rational re-reading or reductive method (C), make certain that you are ready to apply the same C to each and every religious tradition, including and especially your own worldview, preferably first.*

This, recall, was the “golden rule of comparison” we introduced in a number of places in the textbook. No worldview—including secular and scientific ones—is complete and immune

from analysis and questioning. To compare is to question *everything*, including and especially oneself. Reflexivity is everything. It is all about the mirror. Don't believe everything you think.